

**WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:**

1. A snowmobile comprising:
  - a frame;
  - a motor supported by the frame;
  - an endless drive track supported by the frame and operatively connected to the motor;
  - a straddle type seat supported by the frame;
  - two steering skis supported by the frame;
  - a side panel connected to the frame, the side panel having a lower leg support that is constructed and arranged to support a snowmobile rider's lower leg.
2. The snowmobile of claim 1, wherein:
  - the side panel is connected to the frame for relative pivotal movement about a side panel axis, and
  - the side panel has open and closed positions relative to the frame.
3. The snowmobile of claim 2, wherein the side panel axis forms an angle with a vertically extending line that is about 19 degrees.
4. The snowmobile of claim 2, wherein a side of the motor is accessible when in its open position.
5. The snowmobile of claim 2, wherein the side panel covers a side of the motor when in its closed position.

6. The snowmobile of claim 1, wherein the lower leg support is rigidly supported by the frame such that lower leg forces exerted on the side panel by the snowmobile rider are transferred to the frame through the side panel.

7. The snowmobile of claim 1, wherein:  
the snowmobile further comprising a starter cord and handle operatively connected to the motor, and  
the side panel includes a hole through which the handle may be accessed to start the motor.

8. The snowmobile of claim 7, wherein:  
the side panel has an outer surface that surrounds the hole,  
when the handle is in a wound position, the handle does not extend outwardly past the outer surface, and  
when the handle is in a unwound position, the starter cord passes through the hole.

9. The snowmobile of claim 1, wherein the side panel comprises:  
a first panel portion that extends generally longitudinally and vertically;  
a second panel portion that extends laterally inwardly from a rearward end of the first panel portion, the second panel portion defining the lower leg support; and  
a third panel portion that is generally vertical and extends rearwardly from an inward portion of the second panel portion.

10. The snowmobile of claim 9, further comprising a latch mechanism that selectively secures the third panel portion to the frame.

11. The snowmobile of claim 9, wherein the first panel portion is constructed and arranged to be disposed laterally outwardly from the snowmobile rider's leg so as to protect the snowmobile rider's leg during operation of the snowmobile.

12. The snowmobile of claim 9, wherein the third panel portion defines an inner leg support.

13. The snowmobile of claim 1, wherein the side panel has a knee rest that is constructed and arranged to support the snowmobile rider's knee.

14. The snowmobile of claim 1, wherein the side panel has a lower front leg support that is constructed and arranged to support a lower front portion of the snowmobile rider's leg.

15. A snowmobile comprising:  
a frame;  
an internal combustion engine supported by the frame;  
a rewind starter that includes a starter cord and a handle operatively connected to the engine;  
an endless drive track supported by the frame and operatively connected to the engine;  
a straddle type seat supported by the frame;  
two steering skis supported by the frame; and  
a side panel connected to the frame, the side panel including a hole through which the handle may be accessed to start the engine.

16. The snowmobile of claim 15, wherein:  
the side panel has an outer surface that surrounds the hole,

when the handle is in a wound position, the handle does not extend outwardly past the outer surface, and

when the handle is in a unwound position, the starter cord passes through the hole.

17. The snowmobile of claim 15, wherein:

the side panel is connected to the frame for relative pivotal movement about a side panel axis, and

the side panel has open and closed positions relative to the frame.

18. The snowmobile of claim 17, wherein the side panel axis forms an angle with a vertically extending line that is about 19 degrees.

19. The snowmobile of claim 17, wherein a side of the engine is accessible when the side panel is in its open position.

20. The snowmobile of claim 17, wherein the side panel covers a side of the engine when in its closed position.